

HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN VIEW COMMUNISM?*

*Let judgment roll down as waters, and
righteousness as a mighty stream.*

Amos 5:24

Few issues demand a more thorough and sober discussion than that presented by Communism. For at least three reasons every Christian minister should feel obligated to speak to his people on this controversial theme.

The first reason recognizes that the widespread influence of Communism has, like a mighty tidal wave, spread through Russia, China, Eastern Europe, and now even to our hemisphere. Nearly a thousand million of the peoples of the world believe in its teachings, many of them embracing it as a new religion to which they have surrendered completely. Such a force cannot be ignored.

A second reason is that Communism is the only serious rival to Christianity. Such great world religions as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Mohammedanism are possible alternatives to Christianity, but no one conversant with the hard facts of the modern world will deny that Communism is Christianity's most formidable rival.

A third reason is that it is unfair and certainly unscientific to condemn a system before we know what that system teaches and why it is wrong.

* Originally published in *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). Copyright © 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr. All material used by permission of the Estate of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Writers House, LLC.

Let me state clearly the basic premise of this sermon: Communism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. A true Christian cannot be a true Communist, for the two philosophies are antithetical and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot reconcile them. Why is this true?

I

First, Communism is based on a materialistic and humanistic view of life and history. According to Communist theory, matter, not mind or spirit, speaks the last word in the universe. Such a philosophy is avowedly secularistic and atheistic. Under it, God is merely a figment of the imagination, religion is a product of fear and ignorance, and the church is an invention of the rulers to control the masses. Moreover, Communism, like humanism, thrives on the grand illusion that man, unaided by any divine power, can save himself and usher in a new society—

I fight alone, and win or sink,
I need no one to make me free;
I want no Jesus Christ to think,
That He could ever die for me.

Cold atheism wrapped in the garments of materialism, Communism provides no place for God or Christ.

At the center of the Christian faith is the affirmation that there is a God in the universe who is the ground and essence of all reality. A Being of infinite love and boundless power, God is the creator, sustainer, and conserver of values. In opposition to Communism's atheistic materialism, Christianity posits a theistic idealism. Reality cannot be explained by matter in motion or the push and pull of economic forces. Christianity affirms that at the heart of reality is

a Heart, a loving Father who works through history for the salvation of his children. Man cannot save himself, for man is not the measure of all things and humanity is not God. Bound by the chains of his own sin and finiteness, man needs a Savior.

Second, Communism is based on ethical relativism and accepts no stable moral absolutes. Right and wrong are relative to the most expedient methods for dealing with class war.

Communism exploits the dreadful philosophy that the end justifies the means. It enunciates movingly the theory of a classless society, but alas! its methods for achieving this noble end are all too often ignoble. Lying, violence, murder, and torture are considered to be justifiable means to achieve the millennial end. Is this an unfair indictment? Listen to the words of Lenin, the real tactician of Communist theory: "We must be ready to employ trickery, deceit, lawbreaking, withholding and concealing truth." Modern history has known many tortuous nights and horror-filled days because his followers have taken this statement seriously.

In contrast to the ethical relativism of Communism, Christianity sets forth a system of absolute moral values and affirms that God has placed within the very structure of this universe certain moral principles that are fixed and immutable. The law of love as an imperative is the norm for all of man's actions. Furthermore, Christianity at its best refuses to live by a philosophy of ends justifying means. Destructive means cannot bring constructive ends, because the means represent the-ideal-in-the-making and the-end-in-progress. Immoral means cannot bring moral ends, for the ends are pre-existent in the means.

Third, Communism attributes ultimate value to the state. Man is made for the state and not the state for man. One may object, saying that in Communist theory the state is an "interim reality," which will "wither away" when the classless society emerges. True—in theory; but it is also true that, while it lasts, the state is the end. Man is a means to that end. Man has no

inalienable rights. His only rights are derived from, and conferred by, the state. Under such a system, the fountain of freedom runs dry. Restricted are man's liberties of press and assembly, his freedom to vote, and his freedom to listen and to read. Art, religion, education, music, and science come under the gripping yoke of governmental control. Man must be a dutiful servant to the omnipotent state.

All of this is contrary, not only to the Christian doctrine of God, but also to the Christian estimate of man. Christianity insists that man is an end because he is a child of God, made in God's image. Man is more than a producing animal guided by economic forces; he is a being of spirit, crowned with glory and honor, endowed with the gift of freedom. The ultimate weakness of Communism is that it robs man of that quality which makes him man. Man, says Paul Tillich, is man because he is free. This freedom is expressed through man's capacity to deliberate, decide, and respond. Under Communism, the individual soul is shackled by the chains of conformity; his spirit is bound by the manacles of party allegiance. He is stripped of both conscience and reason. The trouble with Communism is that it has neither a theology nor a Christology; therefore it emerges with a mixed-up anthropology. Confused about God, it is also confused about man. In spite of its glowing talk about the welfare of the masses, Communism's methods and philosophy strip man of his dignity and worth, leaving him as little more than a depersonalized cog in the ever-turning wheel of the state.

Clearly, then, all of this is out of harmony with the Christian view of things. We must not fool ourselves. These systems of thought are too contradictory to be reconciled; they represent diametrically opposed ways of looking at the world and of transforming it. We should as Christians pray for the Communist constantly, but never can we, as true Christians, tolerate the philosophy of Communism.

Yet, something in the spirit and threat of Communism challenges us. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, referred to Communism as a Christian heresy. He meant that Communism had laid hold on certain truths which are essential parts of the Christian view of things, although bound to them are theories and practices which no Christian could ever accept.

II

The theory, though surely not the practice, of Communism challenges us to be more concerned about social justice. With all of its false assumptions and evil methods, Communism arose as a protest against the injustices and indignities inflicted upon the underprivileged. *The Communist Manifesto* was written by men aflame with a passion for social justice. Karl Marx, born of Jewish parents who both came from rabbinic stock, and trained, as he must have been, in the Hebrew Scriptures, could never forget the words of Amos: "Let judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." Marx's parents adopted Christianity when he was a child of six, thus adding to the Old Testament heritage that of the New. In spite of his later atheism and anti-ecclesiasticism, Marx could not quite forget Jesus' concern for "the least of these." In his writings, he champions the cause of the poor, the exploited, and the disinherited.

Communism in theory emphasizes a classless society. Although the world knows from sad experience that Communism has created new classes and a new lexicon of injustice, in its theoretical formulation it envisages a world society transcending the superficialities of race and color, class and caste. Membership in the Communist party theoretically is not determined by the color of a man's skin or the quality of blood in his veins.

Christians are bound to recognize any passionate concern for social justice. Such concern is basic in the Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The

Gospels abound with expressions of concern for the welfare of the poor. Listen to the words of the Magnificat: "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away." No doctrinaire Communist ever expressed a passion for the poor and oppressed such as we find in the Manifesto of Jesus which affirms: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."

Christians are also bound to recognize the ideal of a world unity in which all barriers of caste and color are abolished. Christianity repudiates racism. The broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel makes both the theory and practice of racial injustice morally unjustifiable. Racial prejudice is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ, for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, Negro nor white.

In spite of the noble affirmations of Christianity, the church has often lagged in its concern for social justice and too often has been content to mouth pious irrelevances and sanctimonious trivialities. It has often been so absorbed in a future good "over yonder" that it forgets the present evils "down here." Yet the church is challenged to make the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant within the social situation. We must come to see that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one side, it seeks to change the souls of men and thereby unite them with God; on the other, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and yet is not concerned with the economic and social conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is the kind the Marxist describes as "an opiate of the people."

Honesty also impels us to admit that the church has not been true to its social mission on the question of racial justice. In this area it has failed Christ miserably. This failure is due, not only to the fact that the church has been appallingly silent and disastrously indifferent to the realm of race relations, but even more to the fact that it has often been an active participant in shaping and crystallizing the patterns of the race-caste system. Colonialism could not have been perpetuated if the Christian Church had really taken a stand against it. One of the chief defenders of the vicious system of apartheid in South Africa today is the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church. In America slavery could not have existed for almost two hundred and fifty years if the church had not sanctioned it, nor could segregation and discrimination exist today if the Christian Church were not a silent and often vocal partner. We must face the shameful fact that the church is the most segregated major institution in American society, and the most segregated hour of the week is, as Professor Liston Pope has pointed out, eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. How often the church has been an echo rather than a voice, a tail-light behind the Supreme Court and other secular agencies, rather than a headlight guiding men progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding.

The judgment of God is upon the church. The church has a schism in its own soul that it must close. It will be one of the tragedies of Christian history if future historians record that at the height of the twentieth century the church was one of the greatest bulwarks of white supremacy.

III

In the face of the Communist challenge we must examine honestly the weaknesses of traditional capitalism. In all fairness, we must admit that capitalism has often left a gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty, has created conditions permitting necessities to be taken

from the many to give luxuries to the few, and has encouraged small-hearted men to become cold and conscienceless so that, like Dives before Lazarus, they are unmoved by suffering, poverty-stricken humanity. Although through social reform American capitalism is doing much to reduce such tendencies, there is much yet to be accomplished. God intends that all of his children shall have the basic necessities for meaningful, healthful life. Surely it is unchristian and unethical for some to wallow in the soft beds of luxury while others sink in the quicksands of poverty.

The profit motive, when it is the sole basis of an economic system, encourages a cut-throat competition and selfish ambition that inspires men to be more concerned about making a living than making a life. It can make men so I-centered that they no longer are Thou-centered. Are we not too prone to judge success by the index of our salaries and the size of the wheel base on our automobiles, and not by the quality of our service and relationship to humanity? Capitalism may lead to a practical materialism that is as pernicious as the theoretical materialism taught by Communism.

We must honestly recognize that truth is not to be found either in traditional capitalism or in Marxism. Each represents a partial truth. Historically, capitalism failed to discern the truth in collective enterprise and Marxism failed to see the truth in individual enterprise. Nineteenth-century capitalism failed to appreciate that life is social and Marxism failed, and still fails, to see that life is individual and social. The Kingdom of God is neither the thesis of individual enterprise nor the antithesis of collective enterprise, but a synthesis which reconciles the truth of both.

IV

Finally, we are challenged to dedicate our lives to the cause of Christ even as the Communists dedicate theirs to Communism. We who cannot accept the creed of the Communists recognize their zeal and commitment to a cause which they believe will create a better world. They have a sense of purpose and destiny, and they work passionately and assiduously to win others to Communism. How many Christians are as concerned to win others to Christ? Often we have neither zeal for Christ nor zest for his kingdom. For so many Christians, Christianity is a Sunday activity having no relevancy for Monday and the church is little more than a secular social club having a thin veneer of religiosity. Jesus is an ancient symbol whom we do the honor of calling Christ, and yet his Lordship is neither affirmed nor acknowledged by our substanceless lives. Would that the Christian fire were burning in the hearts of all Christians with the same intensity as the Communist fire is burning in the hearts of Communists! Is Communism alive in the world today because we have not been Christian enough?

We need to pledge ourselves anew to the cause of Christ. We must recapture the spirit of the early church. Wherever the early Christians went, they made a triumphant witness for Christ. Whether on the village streets or in the city jails, they daringly proclaimed the good news of the gospel. Their reward for this audacious witness was often the excruciating agony of a lion's den or the poignant pain of a chopping block, but they continued in the faith that they had discovered a cause so great and had been transformed by a Savior so divine that even death was not too great a sacrifice. When they entered a town, the power structure became disturbed. Their new gospel brought the refreshing warmth of spring to men whose lives had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism. They urged men to revolt against old systems of injustice and old structures of immorality. When the rulers objected, these strange people, intoxicated with the wine of God's grace, continued to proclaim the gospel until even men and women in Caesar's

household were convinced, until jailers dropped their keys, and until kings trembled on their thrones. T. R. Glover has written that the early Christians “out-thought, out-lived, and out-died” everyone else.

Where is that kind of fervor today? Where is that kind of daring, revolutionary commitment to Christ today? Is it hidden behind smoke screens and altars? Is it buried in a grave called respectability? Is it inextricably bound with nameless status quos and imprisoned within cells of stagnant mores? This devotion must again be released. Christ must once more be enthroned in our lives.

This is our best defense against Communism. War is not the answer. Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons. Let us not join those who shout war and who through their misguided passions urge the United States to relinquish its participation in the United Nations. These are days when Christians must evince wise restraint and calm reasonableness. We must not call everyone a Communist or an appeaser who recognizes that hate and hysteria are not the final answers to the problems of these turbulent days. We must not engage in a negative anti-Communism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy, realizing that our greatest defense against Communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice and righteousness. After our condemnation of the philosophy of Communism has been eloquently expressed, we must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity, injustice, and racial discrimination which are the fertile soil in which the seed of Communism grows and develops. Communism thrives only when the doors of opportunity are closed and human aspirations are stifled. Like the early Christians, we must move into a sometimes hostile world armed with the revolutionary gospel of Jesus Christ. With this powerful gospel we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed

the day when “every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

Our hard challenge and our sublime opportunity is to bear witness to the spirit of Christ in fashioning a truly Christian world. If we accept the challenge with devotion and valor, the bell of history will toll for Communism, and we shall make the world safe for democracy and secure for the people of Christ.